

STATEMENT

OF

THOMAS J. MCCOOL
FEDERAL COORDINATING OFFICER

FEDERAL EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT AGENCY
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HOMELAND SECURITY

BEFORE

THE

COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND ACCOUNTABILITY
SUBCOMMITTEE ON GOVERNMENT OPERATIONS AND THE FEDERAL
WORKFORCE
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Held in Fort Myers, Florida

*“Weathering the Storm: Oversight of the Federal Response and Recovery Efforts in
Southwestern Florida following Hurricane Ian”*

Submitted

By

Federal Emergency Management Agency
500 C Street SW
Washington, D.C. 20472

August 10, 2023

Chairman Sessions, Ranking Member Mfume, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to discuss the Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) efforts to help local communities and individuals recover from the devastating impact of Hurricane Ian. My name is Tom McCool, and I am a Type 1 Federal Coordinating Officer (FCO) for FEMA, where I have worked as an FCO for 14 years. I was the FCO for Hurricane Ian from the time it hit in September 2022 until April 2023.

Hurricane Ian made landfall along the west coast of Florida as a powerful Category 5 hurricane. It was the strongest hurricane to make landfall in Florida since Hurricane Michael in 2018, and the deadliest hurricane to strike the state of Florida since the 1935 Labor Day hurricane. At \$112.9 billion in damage, Ian is the third costliest natural disaster to occur in the United States, after Hurricane Katrina and Hurricane Harvey. The storm was also unpredictable, which complicated preparedness and response efforts. Initially anticipated to strike the metropolitan Tampa Bay area, the hurricane instead took aim at Lee County and pushed a destructive 10-to-15-foot storm surge into Fort Myers Beach, Sanibel Island, and Pine Island, before moving across the state, causing major flooding in Orange, Seminole, and Volusia counties among many others. Combined with high winds, this resulted in damage to over 50,000 homes and businesses, and the collapse of a large portion of the Sanibel Causeway, temporarily cutting off all vehicle access to Sanibel Island.

Under the leadership of Administrator Deanne Criswell, even before the storm made landfall, FEMA coordinated with the Florida Division of Emergency Management (FDEM) and local partners, to ensure resources were in place for a rapid response followed immediately by recovery actions. FEMA adopted a "people first" focus and worked aggressively to eliminate barriers that might slow down our efforts to help individuals and communities impacted by the storm.

Ahead of the storm's arrival, FEMA pre-staged resources and commodities in multiple locations close enough to act quickly but out of harm's way, such as 3.7 million meals and 3.5 million liters of water at Maxwell Air Force Base in Alabama, 128,000 gallons of fuel at Robins Air Force Base in Georgia, as well as federal Urban Search and Rescue personnel staged throughout Florida, who were not only able to assist in lifesaving operations, but also facilitate expeditious structural assessments to help FEMA speed up assistance to communities.

FEMA acted quickly to coordinate the deployment of more than 4,000 federal responders to assist survivors; to provide 11 million liters of water and 6.8 million meals to the state for distribution; to evacuate 183 healthcare facilities; and to utilize seven Disaster Medical Assistance Teams (DMATs) in the treatment of more than 3,700 individuals. FEMA also immediately arranged for barges and helicopters to reestablish critical services on Sanibel Island until the Causeway could be repaired.

A key element of helping communities recover from a disaster is getting roads open and neighborhoods cleaned up. To do this as quickly as possible, we implemented a unique Rapid Debris Removal Task Force that used a combination of satellite, fly-over, and on-the-ground data to quickly identify areas where the debris was particularly concentrated and to clear 19 million cubic yards of debris—enough to fill more than 5,800 Olympic size swimming pools—

within six weeks across the hardest hit areas. This was weeks faster than we have been able to do with past storms.

Inputting the data collected into our Geographic Information Systems (GIS) also allowed us to expedite remote damage assessments for private homes and buildings, eliminating the need for an in-person inspection. Assessments were conducted using artificial intelligence, crowdsourcing, and high-resolution imagery from satellite, air, and ground enabling us to distribute more than \$78 million in disaster assistance into the hands of more than 5,600 disaster survivors much faster than with traditional methods.

These and other innovative solutions were critical to jumpstart recovery for impacted individuals and communities, and FEMA is committed to further building on this work. Ten months out from the disaster, more than \$8 billion has been paid out in either direct financial assistance, SBA disaster loans, or flood insurance payments to help communities, individuals, businesses, and families recover from the devastation.

However, we know that there is still a lot of work to be done. For communities and families still working to get back on their feet, recovery never comes quickly enough. Housing remains a challenge for some survivors, and I look forward to discussing such challenges today. FEMA is committed for the long term, and we will be here until the job is done.

Overall, FEMA has a workforce of over 22,000 dedicated employees who have a wealth of disaster experience and are ready to deploy at a moment's notice to any disaster. We have both national and regional personnel at the ready to support lifesaving and life-sustaining response operations, including four National and 13 Regional Incident Management Assistance Teams (IMATs); 28 Urban Search and Rescue Teams; and 36 Emergency Communications Teams.

Our warehouses and distribution centers across the country are stocked with more than 30 million liters of water, more than 24 million meals, more than 72,000 cots, nearly 1 million blankets, and over 900 generators. Beyond that, our pre-negotiated contracts and interagency partners are ready to meet the moment of any disaster that develops.

We are constantly learning and improving our capabilities. This year, we're excited about new and innovative programs and initiatives to better help the communities and individuals we serve. In addition to the Disaster Survivor Assistance Teams that go door-to-door to connect survivors with services, we are implementing staffing, training, technology, and operational improvements for Enhanced Applicant Services which will allow us to provide proactive and targeted casework for disaster survivors as they navigate their recovery. Making sure survivors are able to navigate FEMA's programs is a core element of our people-first approach and, simply, the right thing to do.

Our approach to post-disaster housing continues to evolve based on successes and challenges from previous direct housing missions. Opportunities remain to improve our approach to deliver safe, durable housing for displaced survivors following any disaster, regardless of location, scope, or scale. Last year, for the first time, we utilized Direct Housing Implementation Teams,

or DHITs, to expedite disaster housing solutions for survivors. This is an approach we are continuing to build upon this year.

We're also excited to continue to expand our Public Assistance Navigators approach to provide in-person technical assistance to applicants and recipients for complex projects at critical junctures in the Public Assistance project development cycle.

Finally, as we do every year to mark the start of the Atlantic Hurricane Season, we continue to amplify the message of preparedness. We encourage everyone to take the necessary steps to protect their families well before a storm approaches land. Always listen to protective action guidance from local emergency management officials and know your evacuation zone and routes. If told to evacuate, evacuate. Prepare and act while time is on your side.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify today, and I look forward to your questions.